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ABSTRACT

This booklet contains transcripts of two radio programs on the teaching of reading that were coproduced by the National Public Radio and the Institute for Educational Leadership of the George Washington University. The first transcript emphasizes the child's readiness and motivation in learning to read and provides an overview of children's reading achievement in the United States. It includes excerpts of children reading at home, a librarian reading to children, and comments by nationally known experts in the area of reading. The second transcript emphasizes the teaching of reading and gives examples of different methods used effectively in schools. (HKM)

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READING, PARTS I & II, PROGRAM NOS. 268-269

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION	1
CHILD READING AT HOME	1
SECOND CHILD READING AT HOME	1
A LIBRARIAN READING TO CHILDREN	1-2
ROGER FARR OF THE INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION	2-4
DOROTHY RICH, DIRECTOR OF THE HOME AND SCHOOL INSTITUTE IN WASHINGTON, D. C.	4-5
FARR & RICH DO NOT FULLY CONDEMN TV AS DELETERIOUS TO KIDS	5-6
FIRST GRADE TEACHER LOVES TO TEACH KIDS TO READ	7
FARR SAYS KIDS ENJOY READING MORE WHEN THEY GET SOMETHING OUT OF IT	7-8
A READING CLASS STRAIGHT FROM THE MANUAL	8
KEN KOMOSKI OF EDUCATIONAL PRODUCTS INFORMATION EXCHANGE	8-9
MONTE PENNEY OF THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION	9-11
ROGER FARR HELPS TO DEVISE THOSE READING TESTS	11

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"READING: PART ONE"

CHILD READING AT HOME

CHILD: An eel is a fish and so is a pike. This is a shoeshine shop. I need a shoeshine.

MERROW: That first grader is already a pretty good reader, and she'll get better.

REINHARDT: She'll probably do well on standardized reading tests and contribute to the general rise in reading scores among elementary school children.

MERROW: Reading scores for grade school kids have gone up.

REINHARDT: But that doesn't necessarily mean that children really read better, or that the teaching of reading is better. It doesn't even mean that children read more. I'm Barbara Reinhardt.

MERROW: I'm John Merrow, for NPR's Options in Education, with a report on learning to read.

CHILD READING AT HOME

CHILD: He had been shipwrecked on a tr --

ADULT: Tro --

CHILD: Tro --

ADULT: -- pi --

CHILD: Tropical -- tropical?

ADULT: Tropical, good.

REINHARDT: She's not in school. She's reading at home with her mother.

MERROW: A lot of learning to read takes place at home, when children read to parents or vice versa.

REINHARDT: That's part of learning the habit of reading, of learning to enjoy stories.

MERROW: It happens at the library, too.

A LIBRARIAN READING TO CHILDREN

LIBRARIAN: Frances could not sleep. She closed her eyes, but

still she could not sleep. So she began to sing a little song about the alphabet. She made it up as she went along. (Singing) A is for Apple Pie, B is for Bear, C is for Crocodile combing his hair. D is for dumplings -- Francis kept singing through E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O, P, Q, R -- and she had no trouble till she got near to the end of the alphabet. S is for Sailboat, T is for Tiger, U is for Underwear down in the drier. Francis stopped because drier didn't sound like tiger. She started to think about tigers. She thought about big tigers and about little tigers --

MERROW: Lily Green, the librarian in Charlotte, North Carolina, reading from, "Bedtime for Francis," by Russell Hoban.

REINHARDT: Being read to, that's part of learning to read. It starts long before first grade.

MERROW: Fact is nearly every child is ready and willing to learn to read well before he's five or six.

ROGER FARR OF THE INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION

FARR: I think the age that kids are most open to learning how to read is the youngest age at which they'll pay any attention at all to the story that's being read to them.

REINHARDT: Roger Farr is the immediate past President of the International Reading Association.

FARR: They don't know enough yet to know that reading is supposed to be hard work and distasteful and you get graded on it and you look for errors, and kids at a very young age want to learn how to read. They learn to read very naturally. It's a lot of fun to pick out the MacDonald's signs and three things that you want to buy in a restaurant on a menu. And it's fun to find your name on a list somewhere, and it's fun to put labels on things and it's fun to listen to stories and have fun with your mother or father while you're acting out a story that they're reading. Kids do want to learn to read at very young ages, and I think we ought to do a great deal more with, oh, affecting the environment of kids, so that reading is more of a natural consequence of their everyday lives, even before they get to school. Then it won't become, "Now it's time to go to school and here's where you learn to read, and reading is something where you've got to sit in a row in a class and you've got to be quiet and pay attention and you've got to get a smiling pumpkin face on your paper if you get it right, or you've got to do four more pages if you get it wrong." And all of a sudden it becomes something that isn't quite so much fun nor is it a natural consequence of everyday life. So teaching them young is extremely important.

JOSEPH: How do you do that, besides having them watch Sesame Street?

FARR: The first thing you do of course is to read to kids, and kids love to be read to. Oh, not necessarily because they love the story, but because they get attention, because they get a chance to be involved in kind of a close situation with their parents. I should add before I go on with the reading that talking with kids is an extremely important part of learning to read. Lots of parents talk to their kids and the kids never get a chance to debate, discuss, disagree with and so on. I think talking with kids at a very young age is extremely important. That means listening to them and getting them to talk a great deal.

Well, anyway, then, reading to them, and I don't mean reading to them like now it's time for reading a story to you and if you don't sit still and pay attention I'm going to put this book away and not read to you, or I'll read to you if you'll go to bed. It's sort of like reading is a way to put off the punishment of having to go to bed early and not watch another television program or something of that sort.

I mean reading to a kid because he enjoyes, reading a Dr. Seuss book and letting a kid act out what he's hearing from that story, or letting him jump around, letting him enjoy the humor and the ridiculousness in a Dr. Seuss story. Anyway, reading to kids is extremely important. And then there's a magic moment that occurs after you've been reading to a kid for awhile. The kid will bring a book to you and say, "I want you to read to me from this book," and that's a point at which a kid has now learned now that the words that somehow what's inside of this book is a story and you've got to have that book in order to tell the story, and that's -- now they've learned that, something about reading. The next magic moment is when the youngster is found someday reading to a teddy bear or a baby sister or reading to a chair. The youngster now has learned, hey, I can do this too, and if I hold the book and look at it, I can tell a story. I don't quite know how to read for sure, but I do know I've got to have this book, and they mimic the parents reading to them and it's very interesting to watch a youngster mimic -- mimicking parents reading, because they tend to use the same -- you know, the kind of, "Be quiet or I won't read to you. Now pay attention to this story," and so on. That's interesting.

But now they know that. Even if they hold the book upside down they know that. That's a magic moment. I don't know how it occurs, but it occurs.

Another magic moment that occurs a little bit later on in a child's development is when he knows you're cheating. When you hurry through a story and kind of make up and skip a couple of pages, make up the story and skip a couple of pages, because you get through in a hurry. Now the youngster says, "Hey, wait a minute. You left out this part of the story." Now the youngster knows that you're supposed to be reading this part when you're on this page, and has -- and has learned more about reading. These words or whatever they are on this

page have to do with this part of the story, and don't turn the page till you've told me that part. They learn that.

The next magic moment is one which a kid begins to identify either words or letters. He'll see the word dog and say, oh-ho, I know that word dog; that begins just like my name. My name is David and they both begin with D, and I know that's dog because my name's David. Then he finds another word that begins with D. And he begins to identify the relationship between letters and sounds and begins to identify words. From that point on it is my sincere belief that teaching reading is a very simple task, and it is my sincere belief that if you go through those stories with youngsters that you can teach them to read before they ever get to school. And I'm not talking about kids who are mental geniuses. I'm talking about average and below average kids. But it takes a lot of talking with kids, a lot of reading to them, and a lot of making it a natural part of their life.

REINHARDT: Roger Farr of Indiana University, interviewed for Options in Education by Margaret Joseph.

DOROTHY RICH, DIRECTOR OF THE HOME AND SCHOOL INSTITUTE IN WASHINGTON

RICH: Reading is not just a printed word on a page. Reading is bringing a world of experience to that printed word, and to think of it as the alphabet, just stuck up next to each other, it isn't even reading. I won't say it's a limited form of reading. It isn't even reading.

MERROW: Dorothy Rich. She says nearly everything else is reading.

RICH: Basically, reading is a method by which people learn to separate out sounds and symbols, and when they hear these sounds and symbols over and over again, they generally mean the same thing. It's a classification approach, that's what reading is. So that, say, you have dishes and they're different sizes. A's are different sizes and look alike and B's are different sizes. If you can begin to think in terms of the things that you have in your own home, forks, knives, spoons, and you begin to think that in a way they're like A, B, C's, and when you have children learn to classify them or put them into piles. Here are all the forks. Here are all the knives. Here are all the spoons. Here is a small sized plate and a larger sized plate. That's your early reading instruction.

Don't assume that reading and math and writing, and I'm terribly interested in all of the basic skills at the Institute, don't assume that these are taught only through books. As a matter of fact the book probably reinforces what's taught outside of the book.

MERROW: Give me some other things you can do.

RICH: You mentioned, by the way -- oh, I like activities where

the parent can put his feet up on the sofa and the child is using all of that marvelous energy and exerting himself. There's one activity I particularly like and we call it brown bag. I put my feet up and the child is off there in the center of the room, with a brown grocery bag. Oh, it doesn't have to be brown. It can be green or blue, whatever. The point is what you're doing there is you're doing a kind of version of Simon Says, and while parents are not aware that in having -- the directions, and in having the youngster follow them, this is a form of reading instruction as well.

For example, we can say as the parent is relaxing, put the bag up over your head. Put the bag down. Put the bag on your right hand. Put the bag on your left hand. Put the bag on your left foot. Et cetera. The youngster is enjoying himself thoroughly. He is learning left, right, up, down, all words you need to know. You need to be able to apply them. And the parent is resting, relaxing. But this is a lesson, a lesson in reading.

REINHARDT: Dorothy Rich, Director of the Home and School Institute in Washington, D. C.

(Sound of television channels being changed.)

REINHARDT: No matter how many books you have at home, if you have a TV chances are your child will reach for that first.

MERROW: Kids watch about 25 hours of TV a week. That doesn't leave much time for reading.

REINHARDT: But surprisingly, neither Dorothy Rich nor Roger Farr condemns the tube.

FARR AND RICH DO NOT FULLY CONDEMN TV AS DELETERIOUS TO KIDS

RICH: Television, with its vast array of programs, provides people with an opportunity to make choices, and I would think that a parent should be working with his youngster always to, okay, how much time do you choose to watch television today, in a time frame.

MERROW: So you're saying let's make some choices, look at the schedule and see what's on --

RICH: Read the schedule.

MERROW: Read the schedule.

RICH: Mark it, right. Let's mark the schedule. Let's read it. Let's know that a TV button can be turned off. I do not advocate throwing the set out, or throwing the baby out with the bath, because what I think it does is that it does not challenge the student then to make the choices that need to be made. There are very good shows on

television and those are the shows that ought to be watched, and maybe, if possible, talked about afterwards. Sometimes people don't even sit around the supper table with each other anymore. But at some moment in time, you know, what have you been watching, what do you like, what do you recommend that I watch. I mean one of the things you want to encourage a child to do is to have some opinion and to be able to share that opinion with the adults.

FARR: I'm a bit tired of everyone lamenting the fact that television interferes with reading. I wonder if we did a study of what was going on in the nation 30 and 40 and 50 years ago, whether or not people were running home from school and work or wherever it was they were running home from and dragging out the classics and something else, and that now television is interfering with all of those reading habits. I'm not so sure that people were doing all that great amount of reading years ago. I think television has certainly interfered with the neighborhood movie and going to the movie two or three nights a week.

I think the thing about television is that it's not going away. It's a fact of life and is here to stay, and I think that schools and educators ought to try to figure out ways to take advantage of it rather than lamenting the fact that it may or may not interfere with reading. I'm very pleased with some of the networks, one for example that has a program on now -- or part of their programming, that they suggest reading lists after they have a program that they've shown. After The Holocaust last year, the Librarian of Congress came on and said, you know, if you enjoyed this program, if you want to read more about it, and he had a list of books that kids could read. I think we need to do a lot more of that. I'm pleased to see that some of the networks are taking on their responsibility of moving in that direction. I think schools and teachers could take great advantage of it. A year ago, Atlantic Monthly had an article about teachers' use of television in teaching in high school classes. There was a high school teacher who was teaching about civil rights and human rights in her -- I believe it was an American democracy course or something of that sort, and she had the students watching programs like Starsky and Hutch and keeping lists of the number of times that human rights and civil rights were violated in those programs. And then she got the kids to read about, well, what do you do when human rights and civil rights are violated, and what are these human and civil rights and so on. And so she was using that program.

Kids got so angered about some of the violations of civil rights in the program that they wrote letters to the network saying, "How can you have such foolish things going on in a program and suggesting that policemen like Starsky and Hutch can do those kinds of things in our nation today?" Well, I think that's an example of the kind of thing that teachers ought to get involved in, and there are many, many types of activities of that sort. And I know some teacher education classes are moving in that direction.

REINHARDT: Roger Farr of Indiana University, interviewed for Options in Education by Margaret Joseph.

MERROW: That's a way to increase reading among older kids who watch too much TV.

REINHARDT: But what does a teacher do with a first grader who's never even been read to?

FIRST GRADE TEACHER LOVES TO TEACH KIDS TO READ

TEACHER: I read to them. I read to them. And emphasize different words, rhyming words, read books at the beginning with rhyming words. Awhile ago we read one fish, two fish, red fish, blue fish, and they get excited about books. I get excited about books. Today is -- I don't know what day it is, the sixth day of school, I had two children that went to the front of the room and read stories to children.

REINHARDT: Did they just come to school already being able to read?

TEACHER: They came to school already reading. And it excites other children so then other children read. Hey, he's smart. He's good. I wish I could be like him. And sometimes if you can't turn that on inside the child to motivate him, he'll look at another child that can and want to be like that child. He doesn't have to want to be like me. But he says, "I wish I could read like him." Sometimes because he's a fast reader, and sometimes because he can read a big book and sit up there and do it. And children who have not been read to need to be read to. Either if it's by -- and I encourage them to go home and hop on pop, let dad read to them, let dad read the newspaper to you. Let mother, go to grandmother, let everybody know that you want to read. That's the most important thing in first grade, learning to read.

MERROW: Jean Marshall. She teaches first grade in Charlotte, North Carolina.

REINHARDT: Roger Farr says that children and adults will read if they know they'll get something out of it.

FARR SAYS KIDS ENJOY READING MORE WHEN THEY GET SOMETHING OUT OF IT

FARR: You see, if you ask a kid if he likes reading or not, he may tell you that he doesn't like reading. And if you pursue that a little bit, you might find that what he means by reading is what we do in school from 10:15 to 11:00 o'clock, and what we do is we sit in a circle and take turns reading or we work on these workbook pages or whatever it is, and we get graded on it and the teacher tells us when we make mistakes and we have to answer the questions when we're finished reading the story, and I don't like reading. I mean that gets to be a bore after awhile. But if you ask the youngster, well, didn't you read when you were making chocolate chip cookies, and the youngster says sure, but that wasn't reading, that was making chocolate

chip cookies. And didn't you read when you were looking at that picture and that little article about how to make a rocket? Weren't you reading then? No, that wasn't reading. That was making a rocket. And didn't you read when you read the poem, the most of being a boy is noise and bang some pots together? No, that wasn't reading. That was just having some fun with banging pots together and that's a fun poem, but that's not reading. That's doing something else. And as long as we try to teach people to love reading, we're going to be in difficulty in teaching -- in teaching reading, because people can't learn to love reading. No-one gets an emotional or a physical jolt out of casting their eyes across printed symbols. We get a physical or emotional jolt out of learning how to do something we couldn't do before, learning how to love someone we didn't know anything about before, learning how to be somebody that we couldn't be before. Learning some new information that we never knew anything about before. That we can get a jolt out of and that's what teaching reading ought to be all about.

REINHARDT: Roger Farr of Indiana University.

MERROW: Farr is skeptical of the current classroom emphasis on reading drill. He says that the back to basics trend has led to mechanical unimaginative teaching.

A READING CLASS STRAIGHT FROM THE MANUAL

TEACHER: -- and I want you to answer the questions that you answered orally now in complete sentences, just like you did on paper. All right. Our first question was who was the orange man and where was he from. Sally?

SALLY: The orange man was the captain of the space ship and he was from a planet called Ariel.

TEACHER: Yeah, you've answered that almost in the exact words that my book answered it. That was an excellent answer to the question. Steve, why had the orange --

REINHARDT: This teacher's questions stress recall rather than understanding of the story. She's not alone in sticking closely to the teacher's manual. Many teachers never get beyond what is called the basal reader, but according to Ken Komoski, the better teachers do.

KEN KOMOSKI OF EDUCATIONAL PRODUCTS INFORMATION EXCHANGE

KOMOSKI: I can think of one classroom now where the teacher had -- was using a basal program and actually encouraged other teachers in the school to use that basal program, but supplemented it with an enormous number of things that that teacher was familiar with. I mean short books, long books, magazines, and that teacher knew those materials so well that whenever a youngster was available to read, that teacher,

better than any computer program, could put her hands on a piece of material that invariably was of interest and was within the reading power of that youngster, so that the kid was really progressing almost every time there was reading being done in school.

MERROW: When you think about how different kids are today than they were, say, 50 or 80 years ago, just different in terms of the number of words they know when they begin school, it cries out for a real change in the basic textbook series for teaching reading, that you can't have a controlled vocabulary of only 300 words if kids are going to come into school knowing thousands of words.

KOMOSKI: Right. That's absolutely true. The readability formulas, and they are formulas, they're called that, there are six or so that are used rather heavily in the development of materials. These formulas all were developed many years ago, some of them as long ago as the 1930's, and they're based on, in most cases, a list of words that kids are supposed to find difficult, plus the sentence length and the number of syllables within the words in a sentence. The lists in particular, I think, are giving -- are well out of date and are giving us part of the problem that we now have. We've ascertained that third graders, let's say, know words like succotash, teppee, that are on the difficult word lists, you see, and in one case in questioning kids about the word succotash, they not only could recognize the word, but they were sure they could recognize succotash and they were sure they didn't like it very much.

MERROW: But that's not a word that the schools are ready to teach the kids?

KOMOSKI: It's not a word -- it's a word that is on a difficult list so that a -- a difficult word list, so that if you're writing in instructional material, now, you would stay away from that word. You'd stay away from -- on one list you'd stay away from the word airplane.

REINHARDT: Ken Komoski, head of Educational Products Information Exchange.

MERROW: How good is the teaching of reading in schools today? Well, Monte Penney of the National Institute of Education, the federal educational research agency, gives schools mixed reviews.

MONTE PENNEY OF THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

PENNEY: I think they're teaching very effectively the things that we know how to teach well. We're teaching the early skills in learning to read, teaching how to decode letters into sounds and blend sounds into words. But there are a lot of higher level things that people have to learn too if their reading's going to be of real value to them as they go on through school. Because they're not being

taught the comprehension skills they need to understand printed material. There are lots of things that you and I have learned going through high school and college that we learned on our own without instruction that made us good readers.

REINHARDT: How do you teach those things?

PENNEY: I think we're just learning how now. I think the main point that I have to make about reading today is that we're coming up with an entirely new conception of what it is and how it works.

MERROW: You'd better explain that.

PENNEY: Okay. I think I can do that best by comparison. I said a while ago that schools are doing a great job with teaching decoding, and the early skills taught in grades K to 3. Reading is a lot more than that, and the kind of assumption behind our present instruction is that we decode the sounds into -- decode the letters into sounds and make words out of the sounds and then we understand automatically. But we know now that that's not true. Understanding comes from things we already know, what's on the page, and a lot of work inside the mind of the reader. It's an actual creative process to make meaning.

MERROW: Are you suggesting that somehow that all could be taught?

PENNEY: Very much so. A nice example would be some of the things going on teaching children how to study more effectively. We teach them to ask questions like do I understand what I just read. If not, have I seen any material like that before. If I have, what did I do then. Did it work. So that people have techniques that they can use to shape up their own reading.

MERROW: It sounds as if you're saying that the teaching should encourage a kind of critical attitude or questioning and less on a rote approach.

PENNEY: Absolutely. There was an experiment recently by David Pearson, who taught teachers to ask questions that would cause children to think. He got them to drop the factual questions and ask questions that demanded an inference kind of answer.

REINHARDT: Can you give an example?

PENNEY: Sure. The typical question is what year did Columbus sail for America, but the inferential question would be why do you think he sailed, what did he think might be over here that was worth investigating.

MERROW: But there are no right answers or wrong answers.

PENNEY: Absolutely. And the problem of tackling questions that

have no right and wrong answer is where education really is. But I happen to think that a preoccupation with testable things for children to do is not good in the long run. There are many things we have to learn that are not easy to test. And a lot of the things that are the easiest to test aren't necessarily the most valuable to children.

REINHARDT: Monte Penney of the National Institute of Education in Washington, D. C. On the standardized tests our children take a lot of attention is paid to those easiest to test skills. The mechanics of reading. Are we being lulled into thinking our kids are reading with more understanding than they really are? Roger Farr.

ROGER FARR HELPS TO DEVISE THOSE READING TESTS

FARR: Well, I think that any school that's looking for end product assessment, that is they want some general estimate of how well children are learning to read, should administer only comprehension tests. There shouldn't be any end product tests of skills. Skills may help one read. Skills are important to teach, to help one read. If you teach the skills properly. But to say how well is this child reading, and that's what I want to know as a taxpayer and as a citizen in this nation. I want kids to be able to read. I want adults to be able to read. That means comprehension. So no-one, if they are assessing on a state level, national level, a school district level, ought to administer a skills test. They ought to administer reading comprehension tests only, and when the Board of Education in a community gets test results that are made up of sub-skill parts of isolated reading skills, the school district is lying to them when they tell them that's how well the kids can read, because reading isn't doing skills. It's comprehending. It's thinking. And certainly we are working very hard to develop the best tests we can. Now, should skills tests never be administered? I want to make sure that I am not misunderstood. Certainly, skills tests can be administered within schools, for their use, for planning instructions. Skills tests that gives teachers some idea of how kids are doing with the various skills. But when it's product assessment, it should indeed be reading comprehension.

REINHARDT: Roger Farr of Indiana University.

MERROW: Within a year the next national study of our children's reading performance will be made public.

REINHARDT: Whatever the test scores show, they won't tell us whether our children are reading more or enjoying reading.

CHILD: And so today, in the town of Kiev, the watchman says all is well, all is well, and you may look up and you may look down, but you -- but you'll see not a dragon in the town.

TEACHER: You did very well. You're a good reader.

MERROW: Next, we'll take you to two schools with very different reading programs, but both successful. Hope you'll come along.

REINHARDT: You might want the transcript of both these reports on reading. The complete printed transcript is available for $2.00 from National Public Radio - Education, Washington, D. C. 20036.

MERROW: The cassette recording costs $6.00 and we also have a free list of past Options in Education programs.

REINHARDT: Our address again, National Public Radio - Education, Washington, D. C. 20036.

MERROW: $2.00 for the transcript, $6.00 for the cassette. And the list of past programs is free.

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REINHARDT: Options in Education is written and produced by John Merrow. Mary Rouse is our Associate Producer. Rebecca Goldfield is our Assistant Producer, with technical assistance by Rich Ford, John Ewell and Jim Shelter. Some of the material for this program came from Margaret Joseph, member station WFIU, Bloomington, Indiana. I'm Barbara Reinhardt.

MERROW: I'm John Merrow, and this is NPR, National Public Radio.

Program No. 269: "Reading, Part Two"

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION	1
CHILD READING	1
ROGER FARR, PAST PRESIDENT OF THE INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION	1-2
ALICE LEE'S CONSONANT BLEND CLASS	2
CLASS SOUND OF STUDENTS LEARNING DIFFERENT USE OF WORD BANK	3
ANOTHER CLASS AT MYERS PARK WHERE STUDENTS ARE DIVIDING WORDS INTO SYLLABLES	3-4
SECOND GRADERS ANSWERING QUESTIONS ON A STORY THEY'VE JUST READ	4-5
MARY BLAIR JOHNSON, A FOURTH GRADE TEACHER AT MYERS PARK	5-6
ROGER FARR SAYS KIDS SHOULD BE TAUGHT THE TOTALITY OF READING	6
THIRD GRADE STUDENTS AT WINTERFIELD ELEMENTARY IN CHARLOTTE	7-8
CHILD GETTING INDIVIDUAL HELP AT WINTERFIELD	9
IN THIS FIRST GRADE CLASS, CHILDREN ARE WRITING SENTENCES AS A GROUP PROJECT	9
JEAN MARSHALL SAYS SHE'S GLAD THAT READING GROUPS ARE NOT A PART OF HER SCHOOL	10-11
MARSHALL'S STUDENTS ARE TAUGHT TO LOOK FOR WORDS ALL AROUND THEM	11
FIRST GRADERS LEARNING WORDS THAT BEGIN WITH THE LETTER "D"	11-12
FOURTH GRADER DESCRIBES A STORY HE JUST READ AND WHAT HE LIKED ABOUT IT	12-13
FOURTH GRADERS COMPARE THINGS AROUND THEM	13
MONTE PENNEY OF THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION	14-15
SECOND GRADERS LEARNING CONSONANT BLENDS	15-16

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"READING: PART TWO"

CHILD READING

CHILD: Jane said, "Look, Skip, look at Billy. Come here," Skip said. Billy --

REINHARDT: Remind you of the way you learned to read?

MERROW: Millions of children are still using the see-Spot-run type of books, but is that the best way to learn to read?

REINHARDT: Other books have been written. Other methods have been devised. Do they work any better? I'm Barbara Reinhardt.

MERROW: I'm John Merrow, for NPR's Options in Education. On this edition, a look at two approaches, very different from each other, used successfully at two schools in the same city.

REINHARDT: According to standardized tests, children in the early grades are generally reading better than they did 30 years ago, even 10 years ago.

MERROW: But what does that mean? Does it just mean that today's tests do a better job of measuring the many separate reading skills children are taught, or does it mean children actually read better or enjoy reading?

REINHARDT: How are schools teaching children to read? Roger Farr.

ROGER FARR, PAST PRESIDENT OF THE INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION

FARR: About 85 or 90 percent of schools, at a minimum, use a basal reader. We know that if you went into almost any elementary classroom in the country, you'd find the kids divided into three or four reading groups. You'd find that the predominant form of instruction was the story and the basal reader, and then the workbook or work activities for the other kids, where they worked on skills. That, in a nutshell, is the primary organization set of materials, procedure for teaching reading in the country today, if someone were to ask me to encapsulate everything that's going on.

JOSEPH: Professor, has the back to basics movement in education had any impact on the teaching of reading?

FARR: It's created a lot of articles in the professional journals. It's a term that anybody who wants to push anything they want to push has used as a catch phrase and they've gone ahead and done what they've wanted to do. In general, the back to the basics movement has meant an emphasis on the teaching of isolated skills, which from what I've said so far you probably can assume I think is a pretty wrong headed approach to the teaching of reading. But in

other places back to the basics has merely meant a better understanding of reading as one aspect of the communication process, an emphasis on teaching reading as a fundamental behavior that people have to learn. There's nothing wrong with any of those kinds of things.

REINHARDT: Roger Farr of Indiana University, interviewed for Options in Education by Margaret Joseph. Today, reading is taught as a collection of 30 or 40 discreet skills. Knowing letter shapes and sounds. Identifying root words. Compound words. Mastering consonant blends.

ALICE LEE'S CONSONANT BLEND CLASS

LEE: Do you see any words here that begins the same as block? Hands? Cheryl?

CHERYL: Blanket.

LEE: Very good. One more. Steve?

STEVE: Blue.

LEE: One more. Sarah?

SARAH: Blue.

LEE: Yes. One more.

REINHARDT: Alice Lee teaches second grade at Myers Park Traditional School in Charlotte, North Carolina.

LEE: Now, let's play a little game right quick. We don't want to clap too loud, but you know, I just love to catch you and it makes me real tickled when I can catch you, but it makes me almost cry when the boys and girls are so smart that I can't catch them. All right. And you don't want to see no tears running, do you. No. Okay. I'm going to say some words. I'm going to use some of the words that we have up here on this blend chart, and every time I say a word that has the beginning sound that you hear at block, block, I want you to clap your hands. Now, remeember, I'm going to try to catch you. I might say one that, oh, might be c-l, or w-h, or t-h, so you have to be on the ball, okay? And I might clap with you to try to throw you off. Are you ready? All right. Blue, black, block, blow -- chair. (Laughing) Did I catch somebody?

STUDENTS: Yes.

LEE: Who did I catch?

MERROW: Alice Lee's second grade class. Myers Park Traditional School, where she teaches, emphasizes the basics. Teachers spend an

hour and a half on reading every morning. Much of that time is spent on phonics and other techniques that help children decode new words.

CLASS SOUND OF STUDENTS LEARNING DIFFERENT USE OF WORD "BANK"

TEACHER: You know, you can use the same word in two sentences and yet have a different meaning for those two words, even though they sound just like and they're spelled just alike. Kevin knew that he couldn't take the boat out alone, so he fished from the --

CHILDREN: Boat.

TEACHER: No, it starts like boat.

CHILDREN: River.

TEACHER: Where did he fish from, the what? The bank of the river. What is the bank? Is that in the water?

CHILDREN: No.

TEACHER: No, that's by the edge of the water, isn't it? The bank. That's from the ground, on the edge of the water, isn't it?
All right, let's look at this one. When we bought our home, we borrowed money from the bank. Does that mean the same thing? Is it the bank of a river?

CHILDREN: No.

TEACHER: What is a bank? Who would like to tell me what kind of bank?

A CLASS AT MYERS PARK WHERE STUDENTS DIVIDE WORDS INTO SYLLABLES

TEACHER: Okay, number three, vital. Where should you divide it and why? Brad?

BRAD: You should divide it between the i and the t, because a-l needs something, a consonant, to be beside it.

TEACHER: What about the i? What kind of an i would it be?

BRAD: A long i.

TEACHER: All right. Go up and do that at the board. Thank you. Number seven. Mona is always calm and does not panic. Where would you divide panic? Holly?

HOLLY: You would divide it between the n and the i, because you don't want to break up a group.

TEACHER: No, there's no group there. What kind of an a do you have?

MOLLY: A short.

TEACHER: A short a. And where does a short a go, at the end or middle of a syllable?

MOLLY: In the middle.

TEACHER: Right. Very good. You may go to the board and divide panic.

NERROW: Not all the hour and a half is spent on word attack skills. At some time in the morning, the Myers Park teachers divide their classes into reading groups by student level.

REINHARDT: The children read their stories silently, then at the appropriate time gather around their teacher to answer questions about the story. The idea is to see if the students understand what they read.

SECOND GRADERS ANSWERING QUESTIONS ON A STORY THEY'VE JUST READ

TEACHER: Why did Andrew Marcus want freckles so much?

STUDENT: Because he wanted freckles because his friend had freckles.

TEACHER: All right, his friend had freckles, but he had a problem, too. Why did he want freckles so much?

STUDENT: Because he wouldn't have to wash his neck.

TEACHER: That's right, he wouldn't have to wash his neck. Whenever he had to wash his neck, what problem did that present to him? Every morning.

STUDENT: He would be late for school.

TEACHER: He would be late for school. That's exactly right. Why did Andrew have so much trouble paying attention in class? Yes, Stephanie?

STEPHANIE: He was looking at his friend, because his friend sat right behind him.

TEACHER: All right. What was so special about the guy that sat in front of him?

STUDENT: He had freckles.

TEACHER: He had freckles. And what did Andrew spend all his time doing?

STUDENT: Looking at them.

TEACHER: Looking at them and something else, Nelson?

NELSON: Counting them.

TEACHER: Counting them. Right. So he'd be so busy counting those freckles that he wouldn't be what?

STUDENT: Listening.

TEACHER: He wouldn't be listening, that's exactly right. How did Sharon find out that Andrew wanted freckles? Jennifer?

JENNIFER: She heard him talking to his friends.

TEACHER: That's exactly right. What agreement did Andrew make with Sharon?

STUDENT: That if he'd pay 50 cents to her, she would give him the recipe.

TEACHER: The recipe for what?

STUDENT: Freckle juice.

TEACHER: Freckle juice. Have you ever heard of a recipe for freckle juice before?

STUDENTS: No.

TEACHER: No, I haven't either. Okay. How did Miss Kelly get the recipe?

MERROW: It seems that children do understand what they read and they perform well on standardized tests. Myers Park students score in the top 15 percent on national reading achievement tests, highest in the City of Charlotte.

REINHARDT: But all the time spent on individual skills of reading means the children spend little time on reading for its own sake, or on writing anything other than one sentence answers to questions.

MERROW: Or on developing critical thinking. Is that too high a price to pay for high reading scores? Mary Blair Johnson, a fourth grade teacher at Myers Park.

MARY BLAIR JOHNSON, A FOURTH GRADE TEACHER AT MYERS PARK

JOHNSON: I want my children to be able to read. I want them to have a basic vocabulary. I want them to be able to see new words and attack them. I just feel -- I know exactly what you're saying, and

there are times that possibly you would like to do something else but your time framework will not permit it. But if you really want to get it in you will do it, but at the same time I still had to take a pick. I would say I at least want my child, or my children to have the fundamentals for reading. Because this is where so many of your problems come about later. You're going to hear two sides to this. I'm in graduate school now, and the thought is teach the child when he wants to learn. I guess after so many years of teaching you come up with your own philosophy. I feel at this point that I possibly know better than my fourth graders what they will need. I really would like to think that when they leave they will be able to read much better than when they came to me, that they will be able to write a thank you letter, a friendly letter, a good paragraph. And the only way I can be sure of that is to actually teach it. I can't really leave it to chance.

MERROW: Mary Blair Johnson, a fourth grade teacher at Myers Park Traditional School in Charlotte, North Carolina.

REINHARDT: Myers Park students do well on reading tests, but the principal admits that most of his students' parents are professionals and are very involved in their children's education.

MERROW: Would this approach to teaching reading, emphasizing drill on the separate skills, work as well for children who have not been read to? Roger Farr says probably not.

ROGER FARR SAYS KIDS SHOULD BE TAUGHT THE TOTALITY OF READING

FARR: Suppose you come to school and you know, you just haven't caught onto this reading thing very well, and you're not kind of very interested in it, and it's all a big mystery to you, and for whatever reasons, your language skills are not well developed, your background isn't well developed, no-one ever did much reading to you, and reading is a real task for you. Well, you know, one of the things that's very apt to happen to you? You're very apt to be given a reading test, and if you don't do well on it, you're very apt to be given a diagnostic reading test. And so what now you're learning is that, gee, if I can't read what I get are more tests. And then if you don't do well on those diagnostic reading tests and we find out your skills aren't well developed, you're apt to get a whole bunch of work books on developing those skills, got to build those skills up. So the poorer you are as a reader the more we seem to teach reading as an isolated task of learning bits and pieces, rather than ever being able to read. And I think that's backwards. I think those kids who don't see the totality of reading, the use of reading, ought to have an emphasis on making reading make sense in their lives, rather than drilling on the isolated bits.

MERROW: Roger Farr, immediate past President of the International Reading Association, and a Professor at Indiana University. He was interviewed for Options in Education by Margaret Joseph.

THIRD GRADE STUDENTS AT WINTERFIELD ELEMENTARY IN CHARLOTTE

REINHARDT: Mrs. Puckett, this is a second grade class and the children have newspapers on their desks. What are they doing?

PUCKETT: They are looking for pictures and they're telling what they see in the picture. They're writing the names of things they see in the picture.

REINHARDT: Making lists.

PUCKETT: Right.

MERROW: Barbara visited another school in Charlotte, Winterfield Elementary, which takes a very different approach to teaching reading. Not much group drill, magazines and newspapers as textbooks, and basic readers on the shelf most of the time, used only as another source of stories. The program, called Success in Reading, encourages children to discover new words by looking at the world around them.

REINHARDT: What are you doing? What picture do you have?

STUDENT: I have a picture of a football.

REINHARDT: Of some fellows playing football.

STUDENT: Yep.

REINHARDT: So what are some of the words you've written down in your list?

STUDENT: Face mask and numbers and a play a helmet and shoe. And I'm trying to figure out how you spell jersey.

REINHARDT: Are you? What do you think it starts with?

STUDENT: A j.

REINHARDT: Yes, that's right.

STUDENT: I.

REINHARDT: That's a good guess, but it's not actually correct. What else makes "er"? What else could that be, Jer --

STUDENT: J-u-r.

REINHARDT: That's another good guess, but that's not it. Some other vowel that could do that.

STUDENT: Let's see here. E.

REINHARDT: That's right.

STUDENT: E, and then r --

REINHARDT: Jers --

STUDENT: It'd be s, then another e.

REINHARDT: Right. And then there's one more that goes along with the e to make that last sound jersey. What else could be there?

STUDENT: Y?

REINHARDT: That's right. And then you draw a line to the jersey on the fellow.

STUDENT: Got it. Yep.

REINHARDT: What else do you see there?

STUDENT: See --

REINHARDT: Do you see the football?

STUDENT: It's right down in there.

REINHARDT: The fellow is holding it, isn't he?

STUDENT: Yes, he sure is.

REINHARDT: Are you going to write that?

STUDENT: Yeah.

REINHARDT: Do you like football?

STUDENT: I used to play it last year.

REINHARDT: You went right to the sports section of the newspaper, huh?

STUDENT: Yep.

MERROW: A third grader at Winterfield Elementary School in Charlotte, North Carolina.

REINHARDT: Students at Winterfield spend two hours a day on reading. They get new words from their own experiences, from magazines, from dictionaries, from other textbooks. They write about what they've learned. They read aloud what they've written.

MERROW: And they spend a half hour every day reading whatever they like.

REINHARDT: But that doesn't mean the kids don't get practice with word attack skills. Children work on phonics a half hour a day and get lots of individual help too.

CHILD GETTING INDIVIDUAL HELP AT WINTERFIELD

STUDENT: How do you spell first?

TEACHER: First. That was our math word we had yesterday. First. What does it start with?

STUDENT: F.

TEACHER: What kind of F?

STUDENT: Lower case. Capital.

TEACHER: Capital. Now, you need to write on the pink line, so that's fine. First.

STUDENT: "I".

TEACHER: Uh-huh. Fir --

STUDENT: "R".

TEACHER: Uh-huh. Now, we're having a blend at the end. "st".

STUDENT: S-t.

TEACHER: Good. Very good. See, you did that all by yourself.

MERROW: In this first grade class the children are writing sentences as a group project.

IN THIS FIRST GRADE CLASS, STUDENTS ARE WRITING SENTENCES AS A GROUP PROJECT

TEACHER: All right, let's read. "I can go swimming." Let's read.

CHILDREN: "I can go swimming."

TEACHER: All right. "I can go swimming." We've got three here. Let's get one more over here for this side. Julie?

JULIE: I can take a walk.

TEACHER: I can take a walk. Good. I can take a -- come on, read with me.

EVERYBODY: I can take a walk.

MERROW: Students at Winterfield are not divided into reading groups.

Or bluebirds or robins. The idea is that in a class discussion that draws on the children's own experiences, each can contribute at his own level. First grade teacher Jean Marshall says she's glad to be rid of reading groups.

JEAN MARSHALL SAYS SHE'S GLAD READING GROUPS ARE NOT PART OF HER SCHOOL

MARSHALL: I personally think there are as many levels as you have children. I don't think you can take and put children into three groups. I think if you have 21, you have 21 levels, as a whole, and when you're back here working with a high group, you have to put work on the board for a low group, or middle, or those in the middle, a yellow bird or a blue bird. And children are smart. They know they're being tagged as smart or lazy. And this way, while you're working with a group in a circle, they're just copying letters and words, and you can go back and check that, but unless you're actually working with the child, he gets lost, and he feels left out. And while you're working, he'll come back, "I don't understand what's on the board. What am I supposed to do? What's that word?" And so you're pulled. You can't devote your whole time here. And this approach --

REINHARDT: Now you're talking about success.

MARSHALL: Success. That's the right table. It's successful. And children do not fail. They go at their own rate, their own speed.

REINHARDT: But in the group aren't there times when a student's just sitting there sort of day dreaming?

MARSHALL: Yes, but I constantly keep my eyes rotating. I call that my fish net, and I call on those that don't speak up. And I try to reach each child so that he will just -- I want to take him as far as he can go, as fast as he can go, as far as he can go, and boredom is just not a word in here. I think you just get bored and lost and left.

REINHARDT: You say that not only is teaching in small groups, dividing the class up into small groups boring for the children at times, but it's also boring for you.

MARSHALL: It's very boring. I'm bored. I want to move out, to branch out. I get excited. It's hard for me to sit in that group for three hours. You limit your groups to 30 minutes or 45 minutes. All morning you sit. It's hard for me as an adult to sit. I have a lot of energy. I'm bored by the whole thing, very bored.

REINHARDT: And you're also going through if not exactly the same thing, the same kinds of skills, going around the circle, and --

MARSHALL: Well, the group -- when you're teaching a group and using teachers' manuals, the teacher's manual, that's your guide. It's like you don't know how to ask a question. They tell you what to ask. They tell you what to say. In this approach, the children do

the talking, the children do the thinking. You're pulling it out of them like they are their own source. Whereas, back here they tell you what to do and how to move like you're little robots. I'm so bored I'm turned off, and I've always wanted those basal readers to walk out of the door. That was my -- I guess five years ago, if I had one wish it was for that group reading, the basal reading, to walk out the door and not come back. Go up in the attic. Move away. Because I knew there had to be a better way.

MERROW: First grade teacher Jean Marshall. She says she doesn't want her students to think of reading as something you do once a day in school. She wants them to know that words are all around them.

MARSHALL'S STUDENTS ARE TAUGHT TO LOOK FOR WORDS ALL AROUND THEM

STUDENT: Splash, S-p-l-a-s-h.

STUDENT: Display, D-i-s-p-l-a-y.

STUDENT: Splatter, S-p-l-a-t-t-e-r.

STUDENT: Splinter, S-p-l-i-n-t-e-r,

STUDENT: Splice, S-p-l-i-c-e.

STUDENT: Spleen, S-p-l-e-e-n.

REINHARDT: Where did you get all these s-p-l words?

STUDENT: Just from in a magazine and the newspaper.

REINHARDT: So you've just given her the words she's written down and she's had to spell them for you, right?

STUDENT: Uh-huh.

REINHARDT: What happens next?

STUDENT: Well, I've got to give her the words and she's got to spell them. Splash.

STUDENT: S-p-l-a-s-h.

STUDENT: Display.

STUDENT: D-i-s-p-l-a-y.

FIRST GRADERS LEARNING WORDS THAT BEGIN WITH THE LETTER "D"

TEACHER: See if you can find a word that you don't know that has a "D" in it. Let your finger look for a D. Let your finger find a word that has a D. Okay, raise your hand when you find one. Do you

know that word? Do you know that word?

STUDENT: Down.

TEACHER: Down. Did you find a word with a D? Where is it? And who is he?

STUDENT: Dentist.

TEACHER: Okay. Percival, spell it for me. Look in your book and spell it.

PERCIVAL: D.

TEACHER: Uh-huh. What's the next letter, darling?

PERCIVAL: E.

TEACHER: Good. What's next?

PERCIVAL: N.

TEACHER: Uh-huh. What's next?

PERCIVAL: T.

TEACHER: Good.

PERCIVAL: I.

TEACHER: Good.

PERCIVAL: S.

TEACHER: Good.

PERCIVAL: T.

TEACHER: Good for him. Give him a hand.

(Applause)

FOURTH GRADER DESCRIBES STORY HE JUST READ AND WHAT HE LIKED ABOUT IT

REINHARDT: You're in the fourth grade and you have a half hour every day where you can read anything you want. What did you just finish reading?

STUDENT: It's a story about this boy who his uncle gave him a birdcage and he was supposed to go out and catch a bluebird, and he didn't catch the bluebird, so he found a frog, and he kept the frog as his pet. And he -- one night when it was starting to rain, he heard this song and he didn't know who was singing it, and the frog was

singing it, and he -- and he went out there in the morning and he heard the toad singing it when he sprinkled the -- some water on him. And then he started to think about he didn't know that frogs could sing, and he was thinking about how sad he might feel that he was locked in a cage, so he took him out to the pond and let him go. And then he found some friends and they started singing the same song together.

REINHARDT: As the frog had sung?

STUDENT: Uh-huh.

REINHARDT: What about this story did you like?

STUDENT: Well, I liked when he let him go. It was sort of nice when he let him go and he started singing with his friends. I liked it real good. It was nice.

REINHARDT: What was nice about that?

STUDENT: Well, because frogs are supposed to be free like they're supposed to be, when you get to a pond you see frogs there. It's better to let them go free and not to be locked up.

REINHARDT: How did you choose this book?

FOURTH GRADERS COMPARE THINGS AROUND THEM

TEACHER: Give me something different, John.

JOHN: A book being different from a lunchbox.

TEACHER: How?

JOHN: Well, a book not shaped like a lunchbox. A lunchbox don't have paper in it.

TEACHER: All right. A lunchbox is made of -- yours happens to be made of what?

JOHN: These are made of plastic.

STUDENT: And this is made of cardboard.

TEACHER: All right. Someone else? Yes?

STUDENT: The time magazine and the math book. The Time Magazine's madd out of paper and the math book is made out of cardboard.

TEACHER: And paper. How else are they different? Take a look at the inside.

STUDENT: The math book has --

MERROW: Fourth graders at Winterfield Elementary School in Charlotte, North Carolina.

REINHARDT: That school uses an eclectic approach to teaching reading called success in reading, and the kids to well on tests, well above average.

Another school in the city which uses a highly structured, traditional approach, also has high reading scores.

MERROW: Is there one best way to teach reading? We asked Monte Penney of the National Institute of Education, who spends his time studying this question, what he'd do if he ran a school.

MONTE PENNEY OF THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

PENNEY: I would want to start with the teachers from day one of kindergarten, to talk about having the experience of learning to read being meaningful, so that the first thing the child sees is a meaningful sentence. So that the decoding skills the child needs are taught in the context of language that makes sense and means something.

MERROW: Wait a minute. What do you mean, meaningful? Are you saying don't read see-Spot-run, but read watch-out-for-the-bus-when-you-cross-the-street?

PENNEY: Okay, you've chosen a kind of functional example, but you could choose conversational examples, too, things that people actually say to each other. Hi, I'm home, what's happening, is something that I say to my son when I get home. Those are just as good to read as anything else. But the things that children read early should be idiomatic, things that we might actually say. They should make sense and the supportive kinds of mechanical skills ought to be learned in the context of language that makes sense.

MERROW: The making sense. Now, there you're flying in the face of some of the phonic approaches, where they'll wirk on the sounds and the words can be nonsense words.

PENNEY: You can use nonsense words to drill a child who needs help with a particular phonic skill. I don't see anything wrong with that. If you do a drill and practice routine for a particular reason, the kid needs help on X, fine. But the bulk of the instruction ought to be with meaningful texts, things that really make sense.

MERROW: You're still in charge. What else would you do?

PENNEY: I think I would try to lighten up the pressures to do a lot of testing. I think I would use some tests. I would use the

standardized tests once a year perhaps. But I think I would try to get parents and the public off the notion that we want month to month accountability on how many skills the child has learned this month, and I would want to report results in a more global way, that the children are doing these kinds of things as opposed to those. And I would come back to things like dealing with inferential material. They're thinking.

REINHARDT: You say you would try to de-emphasize measuring skills regularly, but I've talked with teachers who say it helps them a whole lot. They have some more idea where each student is.

PENNEY: Sure, you know where the kids are if you believe in the road map. If you don't believe that the junctures in this road map will get you to Reading Village, okay? And I don't. I don't believe that the learning hierarchies are valid, that they end up with reading as the final result. Okay? But you can test things that are teachable and teach things that are testable and have a great sense of false security, and never teach reading.

REINHARDT: Monte Penney of the National Institute of Education in Washington, D. C.

MERROW: You might like the transcript of this two part report on reading. It's available for $2.00 from National Public Radio - Education, Washington, D. C. 20036.

REINHARDT: The cassette recording is also available for $6.00, and we have a list of past Options in Education Programs which is free for the asking.

MERROW: $2.00 for the transcript, $6.00 for the cassette, and the program list is free from National Public Radio - Education, Washington, D. C. 20036.

SECOND GRADERS LEARNING CONSONANT BLENDS

TEACHER: Can we play out a little game?

STUDENTS: Yes.

TEACHER: Can I catch you?

STUDENTS: No.

TEACHER: You going to make me cry?

STUDENTS: Yes.

TEACHER: I sure hope not. I don't feel like crying today. All right, I'm ready to go. Drop. Drum. Dress. Drag. Go.

(Laughter)

TEACHER: I couldn't catch a soul. That wasn't a good one. Well, let's take one more. I bet you I get you on this one.

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REINHARDT: Options in Education is written and produced by John Merrow. Mary Rouse is our Associate Producer and Rebecca Goldfield is our Assistant Producer. Technical assistance for this program by Greg Hedgepath and Rich Ford.

MERROW: Some of the material for this program came from Margaret Joseph, member station WFIU, Bloomington, Indiana. I'm John Merrow.

REINHARDT: I'm Barbara Reinhardt, and this is NPR, National Public Radio.